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Interview With Vice Adm. Bobby R. Inman, Former Deput

U.S. Intelligence Agencies "Still Suffering From Scars"

It has taken a severe buffeting in recent years, but the nation's intelligence community now is bouncing back, says a top authority in this size-up of the Central Intelligence Agency's strengths and weaknesses.

Q. Admiral Inman, the American intelligence community is emerging from a decade of turbulence—scandals, investigations and other embarrassments. Just how does it stand today?

A. We have not yet recovered from all the buffeting of the last 10 years. We are still suffering from the scars.

If one only had to worry about the central front of Europe and the danger of massive hordes of Soviet troops crossing that line, then our intelligence is good. Not just good—superb. But if you believe, as I do, that the next decade will be dominated by competition for raw materials, markets and influence in unstable Third World nations, our capabilities are very marginal at best.

Q. What do you now see as major strengths and weaknesses of the intelligence community?

A. We're at our best in picking up warnings about a major use of Soviet force outside their borders. We understand Russia's military establishment. We can count what they have, understand how they operate it, how they train, how they use it. That, essentially, is the good news.

Q. And the bad news?

A. When you turn to the rest of the world, we are very restricted. We're reasonably good in parts of the world where there's been conflict for a number of years—the Middle East, Korea. But when you move away from there, to our allies or neutral countries, our knowledge is very thin—at times pathetically thin.

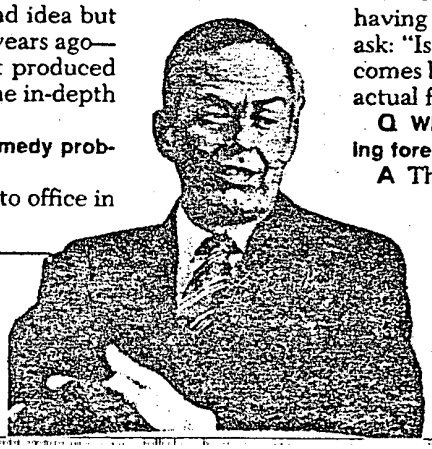
Q. What specific example of this weakness can you cite?

A. If we had known in more detail the economic situation confronting our allies, the government might have handled the Siberian-natural-gas-pipeline problem somewhat differently. The intelligence community did not know enough, or speak strongly enough, about the economies of France, Germany, Britain, which were going to dictate their reactions. You've got to get detailed information in front of policymakers before a decision is made.

Trying to block the pipeline was a sound idea but one that should have been pushed three years ago—before contracts were signed, equipment produced and ships ready to sail. We did not have the in-depth knowledge to prompt smart decisions.

Q. What is the administration doing to remedy problems at the Central Intelligence Agency?

A. When the new administration came to office in



Vice Admiral Inman, 51, resigned from the CIA in June. Before holding that post, he directed the National Security Agency. During his career he also headed naval intelligence and was vice director of the Defense Intelligence Agency.

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failure, we won't suddenly lose all capability.

We are emphasizing analysis of information more than collection of it. You can collect all that you want, but, ultimately, it's the number and quality of analysts in CIA and the other agencies that are going to make the difference in whether you really can provide high-quality, finished intelligence to leaders.

This rebuilding cycle is going to take a long time, simply because you do not have skilled analysts waiting out there to be hired. They must have great in-depth knowledge on countries all over the world, with language abilities to read the local press. You have to develop that kind of talent, and it takes years.

Q. Are you concerned about charges that the Reagan administration is drawing the CIA too deeply into what are essentially political matters?

A. I think we have to run the risk of politicization to make certain that the intelligence being produced is relevant to the critical issues we face. If you leave it to its own devices, the intelligence community will write scholarly tomes that can fill your walls. The political leader has to be pretty critical of what he reads; otherwise, CIA reports will become longer, more abstract, more academic and thus have little value.

So I'll run the risk of having a very close dialogue between the decision maker and the one who is going to produce intelligence. You have to have faith that the CIA's professionals are strong enough to make straight calls.

Q. Some say that CIA Director William Casey is practicing another form of politicization—pressuring analysts to tailor reports to support positions already taken by political leaders—

A. I've seen the charge, and it's just false. I never once saw any effort to force the analysts to go back and redo their analysis to fit some view picked up somewhere else. Bill Casey is a man of strong views, and on any given day he may well arrive at the office with a strong view on an issue from having read something the night before. He will ask: "Is this right, or is it not right?" If the report comes back saying, "That's not right; here are the actual facts," his view changes.

Q. What do you think of assassination, overthrowing foreign leaders or milder forms of covert action?

A. The CIA performs three functions: Foreign intelligence—espionage in other nations; counterintelligence—blocking some other nation's espionage effort, and covert action. I have no difficulty with the first two functions. But the potential value of covert action is greatly overemphasized, and problems tend to be neglected. I am not an enthusiast.

Q. What are your objections to the use